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The Playground

The clouds are piled like gray ice mountains and except for a few who think it's too cold to snow, most everybody is waiting to get let out of school early. The roads around here are so bad that the kids get sent home early a lot when the weather turns on them. And this has been the worst winter for twelve years, that's what Mrs. Everett was telling her fourth grade class.

There are only about twenty kids out on the playground now. The other homeroom teachers kept their classes in for recess today. But Miss Garvey, she's got the sixth grade, she believes in fresh air, even keeps the window open a crack on the coldest days. She brought her kids out for recess like always, stands near the equipment shed now watching over them as they run around trying to keep warm, their breath crystallizing in the air before their faces. Later she will fall into piercing hysterics, have to be brought home to her mother, screaming. She'll never come back here again.

Later on, Paul Sterns' mother will scream as well, at a harrowing pitch, and a neighbor will say the sounds were like what might come rising up from hell if you moved the lid off it just long enough to get a listen.

Eric Crehan is playing with Paul Stern now. They're throwing a ball back and forth, bouncing up and down on their toes to stay warm. They keep glancing at Miss Garvey to see if she'll let the cold defeat her, bring them all inside again. Eric throws the ball too high and Paul has to run to the edge of the woods to retrieve it (so maybe, Eric babbles later on, maybe it was *his* fault). While Paul goes after the ball Eric looks again at Miss Garvey, but she's resolute. Heroic, somehow. She's standing there, watching some of the girls skipping in a circle, chanting, playing one of their games.

When Eric looks back to the woods an ice dagger twists itself into his heart. The coldness shoots fast through his body, through his blood, so that he cannot scream. Right now, at this moment, his brain is registering the horror but somehow not acknowledging it.

Paul Stern's eyes are rolled upward in his head, there is only white. His arms are wrapped around the trunk of a tree and his mouth is stretched open in unchildlike terror. The wolf is pulling, ripping at his pant leg, and as the material tears, the ground blossoms red. Eric Crehan watches, dazed, not really believing that he hears the wolf's jaws snapping on his friend's flesh. It is not possible. Paul's eyes come back into focus, somehow, for a moment, and even though the eyes plead for deliverance they more strongly project the knowledge of absolute ruin. Eric hears a woman's scream.

Paul's arms, which have been grasping the tree, loosen, and when he rolls over to his side, the wolf lunges for his throat.

Miss Garvey, screaming and weeping, is shouting at them to throw rocks, but Eric Crehan is in another place now, far above the playground, his eyes locked upon the ghastly forest scene.

A stone thuds to the ground and rolls up against the wolf's massive gray paw. Eric sees the wolf raise its lolling head from Paul's body. His muzzle is smeared with blood, his jaws are hanging open and red-tinted steam billows around his head. Eric Crehan sees those slanted, reddish brown eyes peering at him closely, accusingly. The beast thinks that Eric threw the stone. Beneath the shaggy pelt, muscles ripple and Eric knows that the wolf will lunge at him now.

Then Miss Garvey has a stick and in a crazed burst of unthinking courage, she runs at the wolf with it. The children are awed, aghast at this display of wild rage and the wolf turns his gaze from Eric for a moment, almost curiously, to the woman.

Then the smoky gray shape slides back into the woods like a blood streaked phantom. Miss Garvey falls beside the torn corpse of the child.

The people who come later, at first they don't believe that it was a wolf. They keep suggesting to the dazed witnesses that it could have been a sick dog.

"There's been no wolves around here for years," Watson Lucas says. He is the Chief of Police.

"The cold could have driven it down to these woods," someone suggests. "It may have been starving. You say 'sick dog,' who says it couldn't have been a sick wolf? All of them, the kids, the teacher, they all say they saw a wolf."

"I never heard of a wolf attacking a person," Chief Lucas insists. "Not around here, anyway." Then Chief Lucas shuts up on this point. He realizes that his resistance to the idea that it was a wolf doesn't make any sense. What does it matter what it was? Paul Stern is dead.

Maybe the medical examiner will have something to say about it. Forget tracking the thing: The big storm they'd been waiting for moved in right on the heels of the attack and left three feet of snow over the scene.

They all know it was a wolf. Even the Chief, despite his powerfully superstitious aversion to the thought. Eric knows it more than anyone, he had been the closest. He'd seen the huge flat muzzle, the eyes.

“No reason for it,” Chief Lucas says. “No earthly reason for a wolf to come here.”

Eric Crehan slowly forgets that he had seen Paul's body torn and ripped at, he forgets Miss Garvey flying at the attacker, a stick for a weapon. What he remembers for the rest of his life is the wolf's head rising from its prey and seeing him. *Seeing* him.

A year goes by and Eric Crehan's nightmares do not fade, they grow worse. This is not a time or place where people call upon psychologists to help them navigate through such things: Eric's parents rely on their instincts and they know the boy needs time to somehow absorb what he saw in the woods, maybe a lot of time. They don't expect him to make sense of it, to understand it in any way, but they wait for him to simply accept that he saw it and somehow stumble on with his life. They do move him to another school, they do that almost immediately. Eric has a little brother, Dwight, and Dwight gets very quiet, sensing so much of their parents' hearts focused exclusively on Eric. He seems to accept it, though, recognizes the necessity, and simply watches. And still, Eric tells them he can hear the wolf following him, watching him. Then one evening in winter he doesn't come home from ice skating, it has become dark and the

wind has risen. Before calling the police, the Crehans drive their car along the roads Eric would take to get home and they find him quickly. He is standing by the edge of the woods, ice skates slung over his shoulders. They call his name, touch his shoulder, their hearts tightened into numbness because he doesn't see or hear them. As they gently lead him back to the car he breaks out of shock, begins to tremble. He remembers, he tells them, hearing the wolf tracking him. The wolf, he says, was hungry.

Then finally there *is* a doctor talking to him. For months he visits the small office and slowly the wolf is pushed away into the darkness. He is not driven out, only back into a place Eric and the doctor don't know about. For a long while, the dreams stop.

“There's a lot going on right now.” At some point Liza began laughing at these words, effectively defusing them. He didn't want to go to a party. He wouldn't take the time to understand a political issue that interested her. He wasn't ready for marriage. The words were the mantle he donned unthinkingly when faced with almost any demand. “There's a lot going on right now,” he'd say, waving a powerless hand. She started using the words herself, to mock him. During an exciting chase scene in a movie she'd lean over and whisper, “There's a lot going on right now...” Driving the highway, seeing police lights clustered around an accident she'd murmur, “There's a lot going on right now.” She made it so he couldn't chant the sentence without admitting that he was part of a joke. He admired how skillfully she did this. They got married.

And it was pretty good. He and Liza both had decent jobs, decent enough so that they could get a modest house in a rural area and have kids. Danny and Brandon. Their jobs and

most of their friends were in the city, so getting to work or attending a party was an hour's drive each way. But they didn't mind, they liked having their warm house to come back to.

There were his moods, of course. Liza protected the boys from this as much as possible. It disturbed the three of them to hear Eric talking to himself, snarling monologues as he paced behind the closed door of his little study. He'd insist afterwards that he hadn't been speaking aloud but Liza would firmly maintain that he had, and the boys would solemnly nod confirmation. He resisted asking them what he'd been saying; it wouldn't do to admit to them that he didn't know.

Liza is a fixer. She loves nothing more than to have a friend call her with a problem related to work or a boyfriend. Then she'll kick back on the coach and talk and listen and advise. Eric only hears one side of these conversations but so far as he can tell, Liza's advice always seems reasonable. He has quietly noticed over the years that Liza tends to collect broken-winged birds, perhaps so that she can indulge this need to *fix*. It has not been lost on him that Liza's attraction to him was considered surprising by her friends and family. Liza's personality is invariably described as "sunny" and Eric himself is often called aloof or even (one time by a frustrated cousin of Liza's) unfathomable. He realizes that Liza's strong draw to him was probably connected to her fixing compulsion, and that whatever it was in him she sensed needed fixing had to do with what was left behind by the wolf. She doesn't know about the wolf, though.

"It's gotten pretty serious. You should meet her. I'd like you to meet her." Eric's father died several years ago, quietly. His mother stayed in the old house for awhile, then moved to a condo. She liked Liza right away, approved of Liza's knack for making a gentle joke of just

about anything. When they visited, before greeting Eric she'd kiss Liza and say, "And how's our boy?" Asking Liza, not Eric. Eric didn't mind. But before introducing his future wife he had said to his mother, "I know it wouldn't come up anyhow, but can we make sure not to talk about..." and his mother had said, "Of course not, don't worry about that."

So Liza didn't know about the wolf and neither she *nor* his mother knew that the wolf had never ceased stalking him. There had been years where it stayed quiet until, like a palpable punch to the gut, Eric felt its gaze on him, heard the panting and the padding steps. Just last month. He'd been standing on the front porch watching Danny and Brandon hurling snowballs at one another. Neither really wanted to hurt the other, neither wanted to make a direct hit, so the game evolved into a comical game of catch. When a hurled snowball was 'caught', it would simply explode upon contact with mittened hands. It was a somehow futile game and it amused Eric. Then Danny threw a snowball too far over Brandon's head causing Brandon to leap, stagger and careen toward the edge of the woods. Eric was next aware of his sons' suddenly widened eyes upon him and of Liza crashing through the front door, grabbing at him. He seized her wrist and shoved her away, snarling, "Get back!" and then spun toward his boys who had frozen like ice sculptures, staring transfixed at him. He'd been screaming, he realized. He knew this more by the soreness of his throat than the sight of his kids' frightened eyes or Liza's alarm. He could feel the echo of his screams in the abrupt silence.

"Your father got a splinter in his hand!" Liza called to the boys. Fixing it. Eric saw she was rubbing her wrist, which would bruise darkly.

"Ow!" agreed Eric, clutching one hand in the other, miming a hurt that was annoying but not intolerable. "Ow! Let me get some Bacitracin on this!" Danny and Brandon stared

expressionlessly at their father's absurd pantomime, watched him stumble back into the house. Their mother gazed at them from the porch a long moment, then called, "I'll take care of it!" and went indoors as well.

A lot of wives would have hauled him straight to a shrink, but Liza liked to fix things herself. The more severe the situation, the more determined she was to master it.

He could never predict the wolf's appetite. He never knew when hunger would goad it from out of the deep woods. It tended to feed on small arguments, bleak moods, brief and inexplicable bouts of despair. Nightmares, of course. It had a taste for nightmares.

"I know you wish Brandon and Danny were with us," said Liza, shrugging off her coat. "But believe me, for us this is a treat." They were visiting Eric's mother. The kids' Boy Scout troop was on an all-day Saturday outing and Eric and Liza were seizing the opportunity for an outing of their own. Dropped the boys off at the Scouts' meeting spot, guiltily gleeful to let someone else deal with the mayhem of getting twenty kids onto a bus. Fled back home and (again guilty and gleeful) leapt back into bed for a couple hours. Lunch out at a real restaurant, just them. And now this visit.

"Mummies," said Liza. "They're going to see the museum's mummy exhibition. Why do boys love mummies? They're dead things wrapped in cloth!"

"Kids are morbid," shrugged Mrs. Crehan, then caught herself in mid-laugh, frowning. "Liza, *again?*" The neck of Liza's sweater had pulled away slightly as she got her coat off and Eric's mother shook her head at the yellowing bruise just below her collarbone.

“Working in the garage,” said Liza, straightening her sweater. “I’m trying to put up some shelves out there.”

Eric assumed Liza had not been an adept liar until she’d been with him. *Dad got a splinter in his finger.* He’d wakened from a frantic dream, pummeling at her like an enemy. Thank God sleep had weakened his fists, but still, naturally, she’d shrieked in panic and pain. They’d quickly gone silent long enough to make sure the noise hadn’t wakened the boys, then she’d hissed at him, “Eric, for Christ’s sake! What the *hell?*” Delayed tears flooded her eyes. “What in God’s name, Eric? *What?*”

“Liza, you can’t keep doing it all yourself,” his mother said now, her voice like careful feet stepping across slippery stones in a brook. “The coffee should be ready.”

The thing about the wolf was, Liza may have seen it, too. Eric did, of course. Sometimes. Usually just a sinuous shadow slipping back into the dark before he could fully focus on it. The sight of it caused dread in his heart because making itself seen however briefly had become its way of letting Eric know it was hungry. A glimpse of it was followed by small injuries, petty but hurtful arguments, cruel remarks from strangers and failures at work. He’d wakened one night to hear Liza leaving their bed, hearing the back door open. He found her on the porch. She was an occasional smoker and was smoking now. The habit was so carefully hidden and rarely indulged that he didn’t even know where her supply was. He came up behind her and put his hands on her shoulders. She was staring across their back yard toward the woods. Just as he opened his mouth to speak, she said, “You’re going to think I’m crazy.” He stiffened slightly. It was something understood but not said between them that he was the crazy one. “What do you mean?” She flipped the half-smoked cigarette down onto the gravel pathway

below; they both watched it sputter out in the darkness. “I keep thinking we’re being watched.” “Watched?” he repeated stupidly. “I keep thinking something’s following us. Something doesn’t want us to be happy. Something wants to hurt us.”

“Liza.”

“I bruise easily,” she told his mother, following her into the kitchen to help with the coffee. “But I know. I’ve got to take it a little easier with all this stuff around the house. There’s just a lot going on right now.”

As she said it, she looked back over her shoulder at Eric and he waited to see what expression was about to form on her face. Good-natured irony, maybe? Something more pointed? She hadn’t used the “There’s a lot going on” joke for years now. But before she could either smile (that would be good) or raise her eyebrows (that would be worrisome) something on the shelf by the kitchen door caught her eye.

“What’s this?” she asked, reaching. Mrs. Crehan had disappeared into the kitchen but peeked back into the hallway at Liza’s question. “Who’s this?”

She was looking at a family portrait taken many years before. Eric realized that his mother must usually put it out of sight when they were coming over. The picture was of his parents, himself and his brother, Dwight. It was Dwight that Liza was pointing at. She scowled with confusion. The resemblance between the two boys was unmistakable, the dark, dark eyes and the sharp cheekbones. “What?” asked Liza. She thrust the picture at Eric’s mother. “Eric doesn’t have a brother,” she said, as Mrs. Crehan gazed at the picture as though she herself was puzzled by it. Then both women looked at Eric.

“I did have a brother,” he told her. “He’s been gone a long time.”

Liza shook her head, with a beleaguered sigh. “Wait a minute, *what?*”

“I had a brother. Dwight. He died a long time ago.”

Mrs. Crehan continued into the kitchen and they heard the sounds of cups clattering in nervous hands.

“Eric.” Liza stared at the picture, then put it back where she’d found it. “That’s a hell of a thing. We’ve been married eight years and just now you let on you had a brother?” She looked hard at him as though, of all things, *this* was the last straw. She started to say something more but instead strode back into the living room, snatched up her coat and left.

“Honey, why did you want to make it a secret?” His mother was back, looking hopeless. “There’s never been any earthly reason to make it a secret.”

Eric went and opened the doors to the balcony, letting frigid air gust in. He leaned way over and stared for several minutes down to the parking lot. Eventually he saw their car pulling out of the complex. She was driving at a reasonable speed, even put on her directional when making the turn. He would have felt better if she’d been burning rubber, then he could have considered this a fit of temper that would fizzle out within an hour.

“Eric. Can you give me any reason at all, any reason that makes even the littlest bit of sense, why you never wanted to tell Liza about Dwight?”

It was because he didn’t want to bring that into his married life. Dwight’s accident had been the second time the wolf had slaked its appetite on Eric Crehan’s misery. First there had

been Paul Stern, then Dwight, and that was probably when the wolf knew for sure that Eric Crehan was its feeding ground. And wasn't it the wolf Eric had asked his mother not to talk to Liza about, years ago? Or *had* it been Dwight?

“Eric, secrets are rarely good things.”

“That's why they're secrets.”

“Eric. Oh, god.”

“She took the car. How am I going to get home?”

“I was ten, he was eight. We were riding our bikes. It was just this stupid thing, this freak accident. We were racing and his bike sort of skidded out from under him. He fell into this broken down fence and he... At first I figured I'd laugh and help him up, make sure his bike was okay. But this jagged piece of wood he, I guess he fell right onto it. Fell the exact wrong way so that...”

Something contorted in Liza's face, sympathy being forced back. “You could have told me this,” she said. “You could have told me about it the first time we dated, the second time. Any time. You could even have said ‘I lost my brother when I was ten years old but I don't like to talk about it.’ That's all you had to say. I would have respected it. But it's not normal to make a huge secret of it, to the point of forcing your own mother to hide it.”

“I didn't want to bring it into our lives.”

“Look, it isn’t even just this. It’s other things, too. You know how weird it is to sit in the kitchen with the boys, getting them to eat their breakfast, chattering away so that they don’t hear you in the next room talking to yourself?”

“I know. Liza, I know that’s a rotten habit...”

“Or you stopping the car on the side of the highway and staring into the woods for five minutes, telling us to shush, while you just stare and stare.”

He didn’t know how to defend himself.

“Or how about you chasing the neighbor’s dog down the road with a crowbar because you said *he was trying to get in our window?*”

“Okay. Okay. Liza, listen. I’ll tell you.”

“Eric, it’s not just one thing.”

So he told her about the wolf. He told it all. Her face was like stone and so unlike her usual expression that it was scary, but he didn’t hold back. It was time for honesty. She was right, he sometimes acted crazy, but if he told her everything, she’d understand how he’d been trying to protect his family all these years.

“It’s literally a wolf. You see a wolf.”

“That’s the thing, Liza. I don’t know. I *think* so. Maybe it isn’t really...in this world completely, but the fact is, I do see it. It feeds on hurt. *My* hurt. It’s like a curse, I suppose. I think maybe because it looked right at me, right in my eyes, back then.”

“It *marked* you,” provided Liza, and for a moment he felt a spasm of hope, a connection with her, but when she looked at him, her face was carefully masking something close to hostility.

“Things happen in the world that are beyond our understanding,” he said, repeating something he’d told himself many times. “Remember the subway? The guy that fell on the tracks? I saw the wolf then. Afterwards, during all the confusion, I saw it disappearing off into the crowd.”

That had been two years ago. Downtown, heading for a meeting. He had taken the subway, was waiting in an underground stop. The guy had been practically next to him, had stumbled and fallen in front of an oncoming train. The train hadn’t had enough time to stop. It was on the news that night and Eric had had Liza watch the surveillance tape they kept showing. Eric could pick himself out in the crowd. Everyone was staring with horror either at the man on the tracks or the train closing in, but Eric was gazing off in another direction altogether.

“Remember that? How I was looking the other way? That was because I saw the wolf.”

“The wolf was in a subway station?” She actually sneered.

Eric sighed painfully. “I can’t explain it,” he told her. “But Liza. Liza, you know you’ve seen it, too.”

“*What?*”

He reminded her about the night he'd found her on the back porch smoking. How she'd said she felt they were being watched, that something wanted to hurt them. "You said 'Something is following us.' See, Liza, you've seen it. Or at least sensed it."

She had trouble keeping her voice controlled. "Eric, I've been worried for awhile now about the boys' safety."

While she let the words sink in she went and made herself a drink. Like the smoking, a rare surrender. But her face stayed cold.

"So how are you going to fix this?"

Now her face took on an edge of wariness, which deepened when she looked and saw the sudden enmity in his eyes. "What are you talking about?"

"Aren't you the one who loves yakking on the phone, listening to your poor little friends with their poor little problems? Don't you just love being perfect little Liza who gives out all the advice? Fixing everyone. So how you going to fix this?"

She carefully set the drink down, untouched. She leaned back against the kitchen counter and her right hand worried at a drawer handle. Meditatively, she slid it open and closed, open and closed, staring at him. "Are you seeing it now?" she asked.

Now his stare was blank. "What?" he asked. "The wolf? No, not now." He seemed a little flustered, looked around the room.

"Eric, let's just go to bed. I think we're both really tired." She yawned, a huge, fake yawn.

“I think you’re right,” he said, and smiling slyly added, “There’s a lot going on right now.”

Liza returned his smile weakly. “Yeah. You know, I guess it freaked me out a little, finding out you’d had a brother. It was just so out of the blue.”

Relieved at the turn the mood had taken, he stood up and stretched. “I should have told you. I don’t know why it seemed like such a big deal, not telling you.” Now he yawned, a real yawn. “You’re right. C’mon, let’s go to bed.”

“Right behind you,” she said. “I may as well drink this. I’ll be right up.”

He kissed her, touched her cheek. “We can talk in the morning. Okay?”

“Okay. See you in a few minutes.” She watched him stretch again then head down the hallway toward the stairs. Quietly she listened, tracking his footsteps. The stairs. Upstairs hallway. She tensed as she heard him pausing at Brandon and Danny’s doorway. She waited, then heard him move on to their own bedroom. Finally she took a sip of her drink but nearly spat it out, appalled at how strong she’d made it.

Liza looked down at the drawer holding the knives, hesitated, then closed it. She took another sip of the almost unpalatable drink. Then she got busy.

He sat on the back porch, sipping coffee, shivering in the morning mist. He looked appreciatively at the steaming cup in his hand. He was never the one to make the coffee in the morning and she knew that. Miraculously, with all she’d had on her mind, she’d actually set up

the coffee, ready to go, so that all he had to do was push a button. Her car was gone, kids were gone. Signs of a hurried but not panicked departure. Liza was smart. He smiled. She'd pretended to be skeptical about the wolf, but she knew. He remembered that evening on the porch, seeing that she knew. The fabled mother's instincts must have flown into high gear. Good for her. She'd take care of herself and the boys and he'd stay here and carefully wait and watch. They were like a team: Us Against The Wolf! Liza knew how to fix things.